

Reaching Millennial Generations

Ministry leaders from around the world gather to focus on mission to younger generations

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James Emery White, author and pastor of the Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, was the keynote speaker for the Reaching Millennial Generations conference. (Photo by Shiekainah Decano)

By: Samantha Angeles, Seminary student writer

On April 12–14, the Global Mission Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies (CSPS), in partnership with the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, hosted the Reaching Millennial Generations conference. More than 200 individuals from every division

in the world, including the Trans-European, Inter-European, South Pacific and South American Divisions journeyed to Berrien Springs for the much-anticipated event.

“It’s time for us to talk about Millennials and the younger generations,” said Kleber Gonçalves, CSPS director and Doctor of Ministry program director at the Seminary. “This is the future of our church, and there are so many opportunities in this new context that we live in. We need to start building bridges of communication with these generations.”

The conference featured James Emery White, author of “The Rise of the Nones and Meet Generation Z.” In addition, 20 plenary and breakout session presenters from around the world gathered to share their expertise, including church planters, a “digital missionary,” administrators, researchers and educators, many of whom are Millennials.

“The decision to bring younger practitioners was a major change from other conferences,” said Gonçalves. “These young people are making a difference in the world because they are passionate in what they do. People were able to see that if we have passion in our hearts to reach these generations, God will open up opportunities.”

A. Allan Martin, teaching pastor of Younger Generation Church and lead research facilitator for the Adventist Millennial Study done by the Barna Group, delivered the first plenary presentation. He explained the sobering statistics of young adult disengagement with Adventism and why he was convicted to do research and equip churches to understand and reach young people.

“I wasn’t going to flip a coin to see whether or not my daughter would belong to the church I’ve given my life to,” he said.

At the end of his presentation, attendees partnered to pray by name for the young adults they each know who have left the church.

“Reaching these generations is a big challenge for all countries,” said Edilene Araújo, a youth and young adult worker who traveled from São Paulo, Brazil, to attend the conference. “We can’t just stop and watch the youth leaving the church. I’m returning to Brazil with new energy because of what I’ve learned and experienced here.”

Next, keynote speaker James Emery White presented “The Rise of the Nones,” exploring the 25 percent of Americans, and 50 percent of young adults, who claim no religious affiliation.

“The vast majority of the ‘nones’ are happy without a religion,” said White. “One person said, ‘I’m not an atheist. I don’t even care anymore. I’m an apathy-ist.’”

In his second plenary presentation, White focused on Generation Z, those born between 1995–2012, who comprise the largest generation in modern U.S. history.

“Gen Z is the first in history to find whatever they need to know without the help of intermediaries,” he explained. “They have instant access to any information but little access to wisdom.”

White delineated the challenges of reaching Generation Z, the first “post-Christian” generation which he calls a “lost generation.”

“There is profound spiritual emptiness,” he said. “But if we change where we need to change, there is hope for the church.”

One area that White encouraged church leaders to master is social media.

“Gen Z are digital natives who can’t remember a world without constant, immediate, convenient access to the web,” White said. “If you are not putting the focus of your outreach efforts through social media, wake up!”

In his breakout session, Justin Khoe, creator of the YouTube channel “That Christian Vlogger,” which has more than 50,000 mostly non-Adventist subscribers, echoed the importance of social media to reach next generations.

“Millennials spend an average of 18 hours behind a screen every day,” Khoe said. “Digital is the most important mission field if you want to reach Millennials in the western world. Every single day thousands of people are questioning their core convictions, and they are looking for advice online. Where are you in that conversation? Where am I?”

In his final plenary presentation, “Rethinking Evangelism and Apologetics in Light of What We Know About Generation Z,” White explained that evangelism techniques must develop and change in response to the decreasing biblical literacy of younger generations.

“People need you to very quickly move to the ‘so what?’ of Bible teaching,” he said. “They have seen so few, if any, lives that have had their deepest needs met by Christ. They need to get a whiff of another world.”

Jazzmine Bankston, a volunteer with Advent Project, a Millennial church plant in San Antonio, Texas, appreciated the closer look at Generation Z.

“I’m an English teacher, so I work with Gen Z, and being able to identify what is impacting their spiritual growth is phenomenal,” she said.

Following White, Manuela Casti Yeagley, a research assistant professor at the University of Notre Dame, explored the state of religion in Europe in her presentation “The Church, Humbled.” Attendees then split into breakout sessions on topics ranging from reaching Millennials in an urban setting to planting Millennial churches, before taking a Sabbath preparation break.

On Friday evening, Judit Manchay, Seminary student, presented “Stand by Me,” a devotional challenging ministry practitioners to support the Millennial generation.

“Can you be honest about your faith like Jesus was?” she asked. “Can you stick it out with me and be complex?”

The final plenary presentation on Friday was delivered by Sam Neves, General Conference communication associate director, on the problem with the Adventist “brand” worldwide. Neves explained that there are more Adventist churches around the world (150,000+), in more countries, than all the McDonald’s, Pizza Hut and Subway restaurants combined (33,000+). However, these brands are much more recognizable than the Adventist church.

“We are extremely fragmented,” said Neves. “A non-integrated message is a weak message. The highest Adventist result when people Google ‘Bible study’ is on page three, where organizations go to die.”

In response, the General Conference Communication Department has developed a new logo and font for the Adventist brand and has proposed the “[Creation Grid](#),” a branding strategy in which Adventist institutions can use six-sevenths of a visual design however they desire and reserve the seventh column for the Adventist Church logo.

“You, alone in your ministry, cannot compete with marketers,” Neves said. “But together we can. We spend a fortune on marketing globally, but it’s fragmented and competing with each other. In the name of God, those days are over.”

On Sabbath morning, attendees gathered at the Howard Performing Arts Center for a continental breakfast, worship and a plenary presentation by Roger Hernandez, the ministerial and evangelism director for the Southern Union Conference. Hernandez shared evangelistic trends in today’s post-Christian culture.

“I believe the best way to engage Millennials is to plant churches with them,” Hernandez said. “It’s easier to give birth than to resurrect the dead.”

Tyler Kraft, pastor of the Tracy Adventist Church in Northern California, agreed with this statement.

“I’m walking away with the conviction to plant a church,” he said. “I came to the conference because my church elders and I have been trying to put together a young adult ministry for the past year but kept hitting roadblocks. These presentations convinced me that we need to have an intentional, missional church-planting focus.”

Next, Seth Pierce, lead pastor of the Puyallup Adventist Church, presented “The Shape of Water,” a devotional on John 4:5–10.

“My prayer is not only that we have the opportunity to become the shape of living water for others but that we will recognize the shape of living water when it comes to us,” he said.

Gonçalves delivered the final presentation for the conference: “Sharing Our Faith with Millennial Generations: The Power of Storytelling.” A Stanford study revealed that stories are remembered 22 times more than facts alone.

“Stories are so powerful because they connect us to our humanity by linking our lives to the past and giving us glimpses of the future,” he said. “They create empathy with other people, which affords tremendous opportunities for reaching Millennial generations.”

Afterwards, attendees split into groups for the final breakout sessions before gathering again for a panel discussion among conference presenters, moderated by conference organizer and Seminary student David Hamstra. The conversation was broadcasted on Facebook Live, allowing users to comment and Tweet in questions for the panel using the conference’s #rmgen hashtag.

For Gonçalves, who has invested nearly two years in organizing the conference, there is one takeaway point he hopes all conference attendees have grasped.

“It’s possible to reach these generations,” he said. “There are so many opportunities if we have the passion and the vision from God. So I hope they think to themselves, ‘I can do this. It’s possible. I can connect with them.’”

The conference was recorded by the Adventist Learning Community and videos will be posted on the [CSPS website](https://csps.globalmissioncenters.org), csps.globalmissioncenters.org, when they are available. For more information, visit millennialglobalmission.org and follow @theCSPS on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.